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### Standing Committees

Water, Energy & Environment, ranking member; Agriculture & Rural Economic Development; Natural Resources, Ocean & Recreation

### Special Committees

Joint Legislative Committee on Water Supply During Drought; Joint Task Force on Rural Land Use and Economic Development; Western Legislative Forestry Task Force, past chairman; Select Committee on Forest Resources

## Senator Bob MORTON

Dear Friends:

It is always good to be home following the end of a legislative session in Olympia. The air seems cleaner, the night sky is brighter and the political rhetoric is toned down. It is nice to be back among the friendly and hard-working folks of the 7th District.

Actually, we did alright this session. I never would have thought I could work with a downtown-Seattle liberal to get the most significant piece of water storage legislation passed that we have seen in decades. The Legislature seemed much more in tune with the needs of farmers and ranchers this year, granting tax breaks on diesel and aviation fuel used in agriculture and tax breaks on some farm machinery replacement equipment.

We made some progress on restoring affordable service along the Palouse River Coulee City Railroad, passed legislation requiring public hearings on forest management in preparation for a new proposal next year and eased restrictions on ORV usage in cities with less than 3,000 residents.

And although I wasn't completely happy with the bill, the state is taking steps to jump-start the biofuel industry, giving farmers other opportunities to grow oilseed cash crops.

We also passed emergency home heating aid for our most needy citizens and successfully amended a school levy equalization bill to require full funding for the state's rural schools for the next five years. Every school system in the 7th District benefits from that.

And I want to thank all of you who took the time to fill out the issues survey I mailed late last year. In all, 1,155 of you gave me your input – often at great length – and it was invaluable to me during the session. Thank you for your participation.

Cordially yours,

Bob Morton

## **Historic water storage and conservation bill signed into law**

It didn't look like it would happen this year, but it did. For the first time in decades, the Legislature approved a historic Columbia River Management bill and supporting legislation with some real money behind it.

\$20 million in actual cash and another \$200 million in bonding authority were approved to build new water storage facilities and to implement conservation projects.

Two-thirds of the money is to be used on new storage and two-thirds of the new water is limited to use for agriculture, industry and cities. The remaining one-third of the water will be used for instream uses during the dry summer months.

The Department of Ecology also is authorized to enter into voluntary regional agreements, but only for new water.

Appraisal and feasibility reviews of storage sites identified by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation are to begin immediately.

None of the money may be used by the state to buy up water rights in one area of the state – like north central and northeastern Washington – for transfer to another part of the state. This will help to stop the depletion of water in our part of Washington and the economic erosion that comes with that.

We put a great deal of work into crafting the final legislation. Representatives from agricultural interests and environmental groups, the “Columbia Six,” spent more than 60 hours over a period of nine days coming to agreement. I want to thank all of them for the sacrifices they made and their commitment to find a good solution.

If the state follows through on its commitments in the future, we will truly have begun to make some progress in addressing the water needs of Eastern Washington.

## **Tax breaks provide much needed relief for agriculture**

As we all know, the price of fuel has nearly tripled, putting tremendous pressure on family farms. And as fuel prices have risen, so has the sales and use tax burden. That is because the sales tax is based on the price per gallon, so the taxes go up as the prices go up.

We addressed that in this session of the Legislature, exempting diesel and aviation fuel used for agricultural purposes from the sales tax. Normally I am not a fan of putting emergency clauses on pieces of legislation because it means taxpayers don't have an opportunity to challenge a law by referendum or initiative. However, I was happy to support an emergency clause on this bill so that it would take effect in time for planting-season fuel purchases.

## **The Legislature also passed a sales and use tax exemption for agricultural equipment**

These tax breaks are particularly timely and I was happy to support them. Property taxes are up. The minimum wage is up. Fuel and fertilizer is up. But commodity prices are down and farmers are caught in the middle. The tax breaks we approved will provide about \$29 million in relief.

## **Hearings to be held on forest management planning**

The Legislature approved a bill that I prime-sponsored requiring the Department of Natural Resources to conduct at least five public hearings around the state as it drafts legislation on forest health management.

Washington's largest state forest, Loomis State Forest in Okanogan County, is infested with the mountain pine beetle which also has crossed the US-Canadian border. The bugs are managing that forest now, not us. But there are problems throughout our state forests, most of them located on school trust lands.

Those forests help provide funding for school construction, but large tracts have deteriorated into kindling. I think it is important that we have meaningful citizen input as we try to figure out how to get the situation back under control.



## School levy equalization amendment guarantees funding for next five years

School levy equalization is a state-funded match provided for school tax levies in school districts that are considered property poor. About 230 districts in the state qualify for the funding, including every one in the 7th District.

The problem has been that the state has failed to fund the program fully in six of the past ten years, squeezing school budgets in our part of the state.

I co-sponsored an amendment to HB 2812 that guarantees full funding for eligible school districts through 2011. It is important that our students in rural areas of the state have access to the same kinds of educational opportunity as are available in richer districts.

The governor signed that bill into law on March 20.



*Sen. Bob Morton met with Chewelah School District Superintendent Marcus Morgan and his wife Jeannie during the recent legislative session. Among other education issues, Morton and Morgan discussed the importance of fully funding the school levy equalization program.*

## Spend, spend, spend. Olympia can't help itself...

The cost of state government continues to spiral. I voted against the supplemental operating budget because it guarantees that the \$1.6 billion surplus the state had three months ago will be gone next year and that we will be looking at another budget shortfall.

Normally the supplemental budget is a fine-tuning of the previous year's overall budget – accounting for changes in social services caseloads, moving money around if student projections need to be modified and to pay for extraordinary expenses like the landslide at Snoqualmie Pass.

Not this year.

816 new full-time positions. Ignoring a looming \$8 billion pension liability crisis. Spending 17.4% more in this biennium than the last biennium – an unsustainable growth rate – and \$2,592 more from a tax-paying family of four. Blowing up the I-601 spending limits approved by the voters. That is the legacy.

This year, the majority created new programs and entitlements that create new bow waves on the budget for years to come. The budget makes promises that everyone understands cannot be kept without future tax increases.

Much of the budget surplus was created by the exploding construction and housing industries. But those are cyclical industries by nature and we cannot assume they will continue at their recent red-hot paces. When they cool off, and they will, we will be looking at another state budget crisis.

## Energy Freedom Program signed into law

The Legislature this year approved a bill to encourage the use of bio-diesel fuel. This measure is aimed at making Washington a leader in renewable fuels helping our environment and reducing our dependence on foreign oil. The hope is that Washington's farmers will be able to produce the crops to support this laudable effort.

However, the state's agriculture community expressed concerns about meeting the deadlines and mandates for use of bio-fuels. It is likely that the issue of deadlines will be revisited in future sessions to ensure that this good idea doesn't go bad because deadlines have proven impractical. We cannot force our farmers into making what might be unwise decisions because of the state's hastiness.



## Sex predators, meth manufacturers and repeat drunk drivers are targets of new laws

In response to the horrifying Joseph Edward Duncan murder case in Idaho, the governor signed into law no fewer than 18 bills dealing with sex offenders. We pushed hard for a sex offender measure that would have met the level of "Jessica's Law" and, while we didn't get there, we were successful in toughening some of the original proposals.

As a result, sex offenders who molest children or vulnerable adults will go to prison for 25 years. Offenders also face tighter registration requirements and supervision upon release.

Meth production is a growing problem in our area, so the 7th District will be the site of a pilot program cracking down further on the problem. The district will be one of three pilot enforcement areas for the next four years. Included in the bill is funding for additional sheriff deputies, deputy prosecutors, a court clerk, and clerical staff.



*Photo shows a meth lab set up in a kitchen.*

The bill increases penalties for meth production, enhances the authority and support for local law enforcement to inspect and shut down meth labs and provides funding to treat addicts.

Repeat drunk drivers also face new sanctions. Beginning in 2007, drivers arrested for a fifth DUI violation in a ten-year period will face felony charges. Washington is one of only a few states that did not have a felony DUI law. While I would have preferred something tougher than what was passed, this bill will get an estimated 400 chronic violators off the roads and into prison where they also can receive treatment while doing their time.

## Supplemental capital budget is good for the district

The most significant item in the supplemental capital budget is the \$220 million in appropriations and bonding authority to begin the process of building new water storage facilities and conservation projects. We have had a lot of talk about the need for storage, but we finally are getting action.

But the capital budget also includes a \$7 million loan to the Okanogan County Eastside Osoyoos Lake sewer utility. As part of the Energy Freedom Program, the Odessa Public Development Authority is to receive \$2.5 million. Finally, the budget contains \$100,000 for Kettle Falls Park and \$75,000 for watershed planning on the Little Spokane River.

I had requested \$6.5 million in state funding for the Omak Stampede Arena and Grounds Redevelopment Project. That was not included in this year's budget, but we will try again next year.

Senator Bob  
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